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A Short Course in the Secret War

Washington.

THE VOTE by the House Select Committee on Intelligence to cut off funds for the Central Intelligence Agency's campaign of covert action against Nicaragua comes exactly 35 years after the United States first began such secret operations.

Paradoxically, covert action was not included as one of the missions foreseen for the CIA in its charter. The National Security Act of 1947, which established the agency (as well as the national security Council) does not specifically mention or

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authorize secret operations of any kind.

Yet, within a year — by mid-1948 — covert action had become a key element of the CIA's operations and a vital arm of American foreign policy. This transformation resulted from the heating up of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, with some officials fearing that the Russians were on the verge of seizing control of Western Europe.

Alarmed at the prospect of a Communist victory in the Italian parliamentary elections scheduled for April 1948, such ardent Cold Warriors as Defense Secretary James V. Forrestal pressed President Truman to use the CIA to prevent it from happening. As authority, they pointed to a "catch-all" provision in the 1947 act that directed the agency to "perform such other functions and duties related to intelligence affecting the national security...."

Heated debate raged over the proposal within the National Security Council. Admiral Rosco H. Hillenkoetter, the CIA's first director, was reluctant to launch covert operations. Disdainful of unconventional warfare, he was convinced that the high risk of exposure was not worth it. Instead, he thought the CIA should concentrate on collecting and evaluating intelligence.

The activists prevailed, however, and Admiral Hillenkoetter was ordered to make certain that the pro-Western Christian Democrats remained in power. The task was assigned to the CIA's Office of Special Operations which handled secret intelligence activities.

Backed by \$10 million in secret funds, the OSO launched a well-coordinated campaign. Christian Democrat propaganda was financed by the CIA; friendly candidates were given "bonuses," anonymous pamphlets were distributed defaming Communist candidates, and politicians were given "walking around" money to get out the vote. Tens of thousands of Americans of Italian ancestry were persuaded to appeal to friends and relatives at home to vote Christian Democratic.

These activities were enough to keep the Communists out of power, and the success of the campaign created demands for similar actions elsewhere. In June 1948, a new Office of Policy Coordination was organized to do worldwide what the OSO had done in Italy. OPC's charter was National Security Council Directive 10/2 and its latitude was sweeping.

To counter the "vicious covert activities of the U.S.S.R.," OPC was to engage in a back-alley struggle against the Soviets. Propaganda, economic warfare, sabotage and the mobilization of secret armies to overthrow hostile governments were all to be part of its stock in trade.

The only limitation was "deniability," or the proviso that if any of these operations was "blown," ranking American officials should be able to plausibly disavow any knowledge.

Despite the sensitive nature of OPC's assigned task, the agency was a bureaucratic anomaly without sufficient controls. Although its director was to be chosen by the secretary of State, policy guidance was di-

vided between the secretaries of State and Defense. The CIA supplied budgetary support but its chief had no authority over OPC. The net result was that no one had ultimate authority for riding herd on OPC and a strong director could do almost anything he wanted.

Frank G. Wisner, the swashbuckling former member of the wartime Office of Strategic Services chosen to head OPC, was just such a man. Energetic and adventurous, he threw off ideas for rolling back the Soviet empire — some good and others wildly impractical — like a human pinwheel. As far as he was concerned, Admiral Hillenkoetter and his intelligence analysts were "a bunch of old washerwomen exchanging gossip while they rinse through the dirty linen."

Although in theory he was limited to contingency planning, Mr. Wisner immediately began organizing bands of guerrillas and secret armies that were to operate behind the Iron Curtain. And with the example of military intelligence — which was making use of such Nazi war criminals as Klaus Barbie — before him, Mr. Wisner recruited Eastern Europeans who had collaborated with the Nazis and had committed war crimes. Over the years, most of the OPC operations to infiltrate Eastern Europe failed with bloody results because some of Mr. Wisner's recruits were working for both sides.

OPC had access to unlimited funds and manpower. As early as 1949, it had 302 agents in five stations and a budget of \$4.7 million. By 1952, the number of employees had jumped to about 4,000 in 47 stations and the budget had reached \$82 million. Other intelligence agencies feared and envied the all-encompassing OPC and there was considerable infighting among them.

General Walter Bedell Smith, who had

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